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“Les Yeux de Paris: the act of looking and the visual in Baudelaire’s prose poetry.”

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Introduction

A finely-dressed man stands at the balcony of a Paris apartment, gazing at the city. Gustave Caillebotte’s 1875 painting *Jeune homme à la fenêtre* captures the man from behind and the viewer cannot see his face. He invites the viewer to observe him but he defiantly hides his identity. There is another figure in the scene, framed in the window and whom the dandy’s steady line of sight appears to meet. An unidentified woman stands on the empty boulevard, wearing a fashionable draped bustle skirt in a dark colour in contrast with the pale architecture. She is unaware of her audience, but through this framing and the eye sight of the man at the window, the viewer is drawn to her. Other artworks of the era show the streets of Paris writhing with activity but here all distractions are removed; the lone man gazing at the lone woman on the street is the only interaction, the only sign of life in the work. Whereas the man is safe in his anonymity, a willing and active observer, the woman becomes an exposed art object, unwillingly gazed at and evaluated not only by the man at the window, but the artist himself and the multitude of art gallery visitors who continue to gaze upon her. The painting is an urban landscape and a portrait of two strangers, a man looking and a woman being seen. One is placed on the streets and the other above them, tucked away in his own, contained piece of the city. The piece is also an artwork about the nature of selecting, containing and framing of objects essential to the artistic process, and the inherent hierarchy of the artistic gaze which searches and judges.

Several of the concepts in Caillebotte’s painting can be found in Charles Baudelaire’s collection of prose poetry, *Le Spleen de Paris: Petits Poèmes en prose*, published posthumously in 1869. Both are defined by the act of searching and looking for art’s sake, relying on this hierarchy of the dominating voyeur and dominated object. The following thesis discussion is concerned with the visual processes and the narrator’s gaze in the work. It is of great significance that Baudelaire engaged in both poetry and art criticism; the two are intertwined and at times interchangeable. Given the focus on the visual register, as well as Baudelaire’s active role in the art world, the discussion of the visual processes and themes of the prose poetry alongside nineteenth-century fine artworks serves to establish new inter-disciplinary connections. The collection’s themes and innovations frequently overlap with those being made in fine art during the same time, and although a historical reading of the texts is not the focus, together they serve to contextualise the role of the artist and his gaze, the nature of the modern city and artistic poetic priorities at the time. Baudelaire’s own influential art criticism can be seen as a theoretical outline for his own
creative pursuits. In Baudelaire’s prose poetry, the visual register, fine art and concepts of modernity intersect with the written word, and the collection can be seen as a literary incarnation of a visual act.

Caillebotte’s painting represents the practice of Baudelaire’s prose poetic protagonist, the *flâneur*, and his relationship to the newly-renovated Paris cityscape and its inhabitants. The first discussion point is the *flâneur*, the ubiquitous modern urban figure defined by the act of walking to leisurely look at the cityscape, who engages in the process of observing and transforming the everyday into art.¹ *Flânerie* is inextricably linked with field of the gaze, and the power hierarchy between observer and the observed.² Similar to the man in Caillebotte’s painting, the modernist *flâneur* possesses power and freedom not only to walk alone in the city confidently and without fear, but to actively view others. In Baudelaire’s work the *flâneur*’s powerful gaze is combined with the artistic aims of the poet. This artist-*flâneur*, who narrates the prose poems under various voices, engages in an urban scopophilia and frames objects under his gaze, seeking the fulfilment of his poetic intentions. He aims to observe the transitory reality of everyday Paris and heighten it, to transform it into a lofty art object. The artist-*flâneur* privileges his own gaze and believes in a personal art; he is only person capable of revealing these scenes. Baudelaire’s narrator tirelessly writes himself into the stories of Parisian passersby, attempting to make sense of the things that he sees and find potential mirrors for his own desires. In practising this act of scopophilia, one-sided voyeurism, and poetic transformation the *flâneur* possesses and dominates the city and its inhabitants.

The scope of this discussion will only include Baudelaire’s prose poetry and art criticism, omitting study of the poet’s biography. As Maria Scott discusses, it is a common assumption in literary criticism that the narrator’s paradoxical journey and opinions align with those of the poet. The layers of meaning and irony within these works make discerning authorial intent difficult.³ His narrator figure is anonymous and unstable, and discussion of the *flâneur* as poet and narrator is not improved by ‘knowing’ who he is, or if the stories are true or not. Despite drawing a comparison between Baudelaire’s creative and critical works, the assumption that *Le Spleen de Paris* is in any way autobiographical is problematic and does not aid this discussion. The narrator mentioned throughout the thesis is a fictional, unknown figure identified through his perspective and practices as a *flâneur* and poet.
The second main discussion point concerns the most frequently viewed object in the city: women. Caillebotte’s painting appears as a visual representation of Laura Mulvey’s notion of the male gaze, the artistic extension of Jacques Lacan’s theories of looking. This posits an inherent gender power imbalance in the narrative arts favouring the heterosexual, cisgendered male. The many female figures in the *Le Spleen de Paris*, both symbolic and literal, are defined by a dominant male experience and gaze. The narrator’s depiction of women is not one of reality, but of fantasy; women are poetic devices, symbols for the artist’s struggles, hopes and fears in the modernised city. Here he continues a long-standing tradition in the visual arts of casting the woman as muse and art object. The collection contains a binary vision of woman, depending on their position in the *flâneur*’s world and their awareness of and ability to acknowledge the gaze.

Finally, after exploring the nature of the gaze in terms of the prose poetry’s themes, perspective and subjects, the final section of the thesis will engage with linguistic and stylistic issues of seeing. As *flânerie* is by definition a visual act, so too is Baudelaire’s *Le Spleen de Paris* inextricably linked to the visual arts. The narrator employs stylistic elements of Impressionism, attempting to describe his vision of modern reality. The narrator’s descriptions of sight and illusory sensation, the perceived movement of light and time as the *flâneur* attempts to capture transitory moments, and the deliberate composition or framing of images in the prose poetry are all references to this art movement. Baudelaire’s prose poetry contains not only *le spleen de Paris*, but also *les yeux*, the *flâneur*’s empowered gaze attempting to capture and control the ephemeral, modern urban experience.

Peter Collier and Robert Lethbridge have argued that “literary texts cannot be viewed independently of visual art; for not only is this part of a shared cultural context but it constitutes one of the informing conditions of verbal expression.” Although the study of art is in this discussion limited to the artistic movements of the mid-nineteenth century, however the focus is not to simply link together texts with shared historical and cultural contexts. Rather, this interest in the fine art of the same time as Baudelaire’s literary work is that they behave in similar ways, viewing the same city in a similar way, employing similar artistic themes and processes. They appear to inform one another, as Collier and Lethbridge assert, and constitute a larger artistic language. The combining of literary and art theory is engaging and suitable for the study of the prose poetic texts, which rely on the visual register of the narrator. Looking at how the narrator’s vision in relation to the fine art that
was created in the same city during the same time, assists the discussion of difficulties and issues of reality, the gaze and looking in the collection.

Baudelaire’s own criticism will support the study of his prose poetry. His definition of modern beauty, as summarised in his own art criticism, permeates the collection. As the prose poetry aims to find the beauty of modern life, in the famous text “On the Heroism of Modern Life” he asserts that “all forms of beauty, like all possible phenomena, contain an element of the eternal and an element of the transitory – of the absolute and the particular.”

This is manifested in the artist-flâneur’s practice, as he attempts to reconcile notions of timeless, abstract beauty and harsh, ephemeral modern reality. He seeks a transcendent artistic ideal on the modern streets of Paris, and is often disappointed and resorts to creating fictions that satisfy his desires; he states earlier in the Salon review that “there are two ways of understanding portraiture – either as history or as fiction.” The flâneur either captures the transitory and creates a prose poem from history, or otherwise resorts to constructing his own vision of reality to create a fictional portrait and alleviate his perpetual disappointment with modernity. By selecting and framing certain scenes the poet-flâneur attempts to raise the everyday into the realm of fine art, to transform the ephemeral urban reality laid before him into poetic fantasy. This notion, influenced by Baudelaire’s art criticism, affects the prose poetic narrator’s gaze and his processes of looking and creating art.

There are several reasons to limit the scope of study to Baudelaire’s prose poems. Firstly, the inherent confusion of the prose poetic style lends itself to looking at the interdisciplinary morphing and oxymoronic clashing of styles, personas and visions in the work. The individual pieces share very little in common except for a narrator’s voice and the theme of Parisian life, as the title suggests. This provides a great deal of freedom in looking at the themes, personas and vision in the work. In terms of practicality, the collection is relatively small, consisting of 51 short pieces, making the close reading process more contained and focused. There is no intended overarching narrative, no attempt at common themes apart from the narrator’s visions of Parisian life. As such, each individual prose poem can be considered as a separate entity, rather than part of a deliberate series. In the introduction to Le Spleen de Paris, addressed to Arsène Houssaye, Baudelaire insists that the pieces are not arranged in any deliberate order and can be read as such; the reader of the work may “take away one vertebra and the two ends of this twisted fantasia will rejoin themselves without any trouble. Chop it up into many fragments, and you will see that each one can exist in isolation.” The clashing of styles and influences is immediately evident,
and each contains a unique, whole scene. Free from attempting to find any semblance of continuity, this discussion will approach the prose poems as separate artworks, haphazard and hung to the ceiling as in the *Salon des Refusés*. Whilst comparisons will be drawn between poems which share themes or features, they will be considered without reference to their seemingly arbitrary published order. Finally, whilst a tremendous amount of engaging scholarship on Baudelaire’s literary work exists, study of his famous verse volume *Les Fleurs du Mal* far outweighs that of his lesser known prose poetry. Whilst not denying the former work’s presence, this ensuing discussion will deliberately focus on *Le Spleen de Paris* in order to make new connections and build the work’s own presence in the field of Baudelairean literary criticism.

In the close study of the nineteenth-century prose poetry collection alongside its artistic counterparts and contemporary theories of the gaze and the visual register, the *flâneur* and gender, literary and fine art studies, this thesis discussion will aim to forge original connections between texts, and shed light on the unique prose poetic voice in Baudelaire’s work.

7 Ibid. 93.